FLASHPOINTS ON THE ROAD TO BLACK AND BROWN

POWER

SITES OF STRUGGLE IN HOUSTON
IN THE 1960S AND 70S

Houston has a long history of segregation and racist violence. From the lynchings of George White in 1859 and Robert Powell in 1928, to the hanging of black soldiers who rebelled at Camp Logan in 1919, to the rise of the local Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, racist actions have periodically threatened to tear the city apart.

The political struggles of the 1960s and 70s changed the city. In the 1998 movie The Strange Demise of Jim Crow, historians explain how the end of segregation in Houston came relatively quickly and, due to a media blackout, without fanfare.

Highlighted in this piece are important milestones that dispel this oft-repeated myth that Houston’s quiet desegregation prevented riots, rebellions, or open conflict; moments of community indignation (anything but polite and restrained) that lead to concrete action on the road to political power for people of color in the city. Many more events have been left off—the University of Houston riot in 1969, for example—but the sites selected can serve as initial entries into an often ignored history.

By John Pluecker

Black Students Boycott the Public Schools

Wheatley High School, 4900 Market Street

To protest the slow pace of integration in the public schools, despite its being court ordered in 1960 and again in 1962, 83 percent of the students boycotted five black high schools in Houston in 1963. Rev. William Lawson, minister at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, organized the students to assemble at the South Central YMCA. In his words, “We had this bunch of kids starting the march, but the good news was the HISD headquarters was downtown on Capitol, so we went down Dowling Street, and while we went down, there were people who came out of the building and out of the businesses and joined us. So we ended up with at least hundreds if not thousands of people.” The boycott and march were instrumental in making the superintendent of HISD push desegregation along faster.

Lee Otis Johnson rallied students at Texas Southern University.

Lee Otis Johnson Affair

1968

Emancipation Park, 3018 Dowling Street

Lee Otis Johnson was one of the student leaders at TSU during the run-up to the May 1967 police action and in the years following. Arrested in 1967 and later expelled from TSU, he became the face of the militant civil rights movement in Houston, appearing on television with his brash, no-holds-barred attitude. On April 14, 1968, at a memorial service for slain leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Emancipation Park, Mayor Louis Welch attempted to address the crowd; the audience boomed, and Johnson stood up to speak out forcefully against the mayor. Three days later he was arrested for trumped-up charges of passing a small amount of marijuana to an undercover policeman. In August 1968, Johnson was convicted of possession of drugs. Harris County DA Carol Vance, who personally tried the case, sought a sentence of 20 years, but the all-white jury went further, giving Johnson 30 years. Five years later, following protests and appeals by his supporters and lawyers, Johnson was released by a federal judge who ruled his Houston trial unfair. Johnson became a symbol of radical activism in Houston, and his arrest a cautionary tale of the city’s crackdown on dissent.

Police Attack TSU Students

1967

TSU Campus

In the late sixties, TSU student activists began organizing in new ways, their radicalization influenced by the Black Power movement and largely pushed along by a group of student activists identified as Friends of the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The students were protesting police brutality and seeking to shut down the portion of Wheeler Avenue that bisected the campus. A series of rallies in early 1967 (including one led by Stokely Carmichael) culminated in a police siege of TSU as the city sought to quell the increasing anger and organized protest on campus. On May 16, 1967, police invaded the campus. Students fought back as officers fired a way into dorm rooms and took everyone outside, beating many of them brutally. Police wired thousands of rounds of ammunition. By the end of the day, they had arrested 480 students and one officer was dead (Time magazine said it was probably from a stray police bullet).

A crowd protests on April 6, 1967, in front of the Harris County Courthouse against the police crackdown on the TSU campus that culminated the next month.

The Killing of 1970

2800 block of Dowling Street

Toward the end of the period, radicalizing—increasingly in black and with “MAYO” added—both with the People’s Party (a model for Party II, modeled after the Black Panther), as well as the People’s Organization for Public Accountability (POPA), a local iteration of the Urban League of Houston, began to rise. POPA was a leader in the Party II, models the Black Panthers. According to one report, an event that had returned to the streets was the police harassment of local newspapers. The police were carrying a home-made weapon briefly other, Hampton then boiled up as police gathered at the stand-off, I mean, the gathering of cops and student protesters. Police officers, several of whom were near St. Joseph’s opened fire on a crowd of four, wounding the four Panthers. The killing has been a Houston history—increasingly in the city, community activists’ attention to what is sure that Hampton are not forgotten.
Chicano Protesters Take Over Houston School Board Meeting 1970

Hattie Mae White Administration Building, 3020 Richmond Avenue
The Justice Department filed suit against the Houston Independent School District (HISD), alleging that it continued to segregate its students. In response, HISD instituted a desegregation plan that mixed Mexican-American and African-American students, but left Anglo students largely unaffected. (The League of United Latin American Citizens had previously fought for Latinos to be officially designated as White to prevent their exclusion.) To resist this plan, a number of community groups began to push for Latinos to be recognized as “Brown, not White” (chronicled in Guadalupe San Miguel’s 2008 book of the same name). The Mexican American Educational Council organized a strike (strike) of schools around Houston. The conflict came to a head when the HISD board refused to hear from a group of Chicano parents, students, and activists, including members of MAYO (Mexican-American Youth Organization). In protest, the group took over the meeting, grabbed the microphones, and stood on tables as they chanted, “Chicano, Chicano, Chicano!” and loudly demanded change. Partially as a result of this action, HISD agreed to the community demands for recognition, and by the end of the year, the boycott had ended.

The Killing of Carl Hampton 1970

2800 block of Dowling Street
Toward the end of the 1960s, organizers were radicalizing—in the Chicano community with MAYO and in the black community with the People’s Party II. Carl Hampton was a leader in Houston’s chapter of People’s Party II, modeled along the lines of the Black Panthers. According to Charles Freeman, another organizer active at that time, Hampton had returned to the party headquarters on Dowling Street when he saw a Houston police officer harassing a member selling Panther newspapers. The officer and Hampton (who was carrying a legal, unsecured weapon) briefly faced off against each other. Hampton and his compatriots then bolted up in their headquarters as police gathered. Ten days into the standoff, Hampton spoke to a gathering of community members and student supporters. After this rally, police officers standing on top of nearby St. John’s Baptist Church opened fire on the party activists, wounding four people and killing Hampton. The story of Hampton’s killing has been largely erased from Houston history; in recent years increasing efforts, largely by black community activists, have drawn attention to what happened, making sure that Hampton and his murder are not forgotten.

José Campos Torres Drowning 1977

Buffalo Bayou between Allen’s Landing and the McKee Street Bridge
José “Joe” Campos Torres, a 23-year-old Mexican-American Vietnam vet, was found floating in Buffalo Bayou on May 8, 1977, two days after his arrest by Houston police officers following an alleged bar fight. The officers had arrested the vet, beat him, and then left him at the jail. The jail staff told the officers that Torres needed to go to Ben Taub because of his injuries. Instead they threw Torres into the bayou, where he drowned. Eventually, after community outcry, the officers, including Terry Deason, were brought to justice. The sentence of a year of probation and a fine of $1 each prompted more community anger and a federal civil rights trial, which resulted in a prison term for some of the officers.